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ABSTRACT

The need for quality standards in career counseling and for the articulation of competencies required for practitioners delivering these services, is gaining increased attention in Canada and elsewhere. This digest outlines governmental efforts to develop guidelines for the career counseling of girls and women. Career counseling includes services and programs which facilitate individuals' development and enhances their ability to make optimal choices regarding their roles in occupational, familial, and social structures. Individuals who counsel these populations should adhere to the following guidelines: understand the assumptions underlying various theoretical approaches to the practice of career counseling; ascribe no preconceived limitations on the direction or nature of potential changes or goals in counseling women; recognize that masculine terminology reflects bias against women; be knowledgeable about support services available to women; continually gain knowledge and awareness of social, biological, and psychological influences on female development; understand that client difficulties may rest in cultural factors which limit a woman's concept of self; be aware of the counselor's influence on a female client; support the elimination of sex bias within institutions and individuals; and recognize circumstances where clients will prefer a same- or opposite-sex counselor.

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Career Counseling of Girls and Women: Guidelines for Professional Practice

Valerie G. Ward

The need for quality standards in the delivery of career counseling services, and for the articulation of competencies required for practitioners delivering these services, is gaining increasing attention in Canada and elsewhere (e.g., Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation, 1993; Conger, Hiebert, & Hong-Farrell, 1994; Spilete & Hoppin, 1994; Riddle & Bezanon, 1994). Previous work has focused on generic standards and competencies, and on guidelines pertaining to specific populations.

One important contribution to these efforts in Canada is the guidelines for the career counseling of girls and women as was developed by the Collaborative Action Working Group on Counselling (Ward & Bezanon, 1991). The following guidelines were based on policies and standards in the professional literature (e.g., American Psychological Association, 1979; Fitzgerald & Nutt, 1986), as well as those provided by governments and counseling associations. The guidelines were a key component in a provincial-wide strategy to promote labor market equality, that was endorsed by Ministers responsible for the status of women and Ministers with labor market responsibilities.

The Guidelines

Career counseling includes services and programs which facilitate individuals' development and enhances their ability to make optimal choices regarding their roles in occupational, familial and social structures. Responsible professional practice requires counselors to be knowledgeable about the effects of gender in human development and to apply such knowledge in career counseling with girls and women. In order to ensure responsible professional practice, jurisdictions must require all individuals involved in career counseling with girls and women to adhere to the following guidelines:

1. Counselors understand the assumptions underlying various theoretical approaches to the practice of career counseling and recognize that such theories may apply differently to women and men. Counselors continue to examine theoretical bases and assumptions underlying their practice to ensure that they utilize theories and models which are free of sex bias and sex-role stereotypes. Counselors promote the realization of full potential by girls and women.

2. Counselors ascribe no preconceived limitations on the direction or nature of potential changes or goals in counseling with women. In particular, counselors ensure that career choice is an open process and that no individual is limited by gender—or by race, age, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religion—from the exploration of any career option.

3. Recognizing that the use of male terms as gender-neutral descriptors reflects bias against women, counselors use inclusive and gender-fair language in all oral and written communication and ensure that resources used to assist clients with decision-making are gender-fair. As an extension of this principle, counselors also avoid the use of generic adjectives to describe women with handicaps (e.g., blind, deaf, and so forth) in order to avoid excessive focus on the disability; descriptive phrases (e.g., women with visual handicaps) are used as a much-preferred alternative to the more generic adjectives.

4. Counselors are knowledgeable about support services available to women (e.g., child care, legal aid, health care, transportation, emergency services) and assist clients in accessing appropriate community resources. Where significant gaps are identified in support services available to women, counselors may initiate or act as catalysts for the development of such support systems in their communities.

5. Counselors continue throughout their professional careers to gain knowledge and awareness of social, biological, and psychological influences on female development, in general, and their career development, in particular. As part of their ongoing professional development, counselors continue to inform themselves about specific issues which may have an impact on the career decision-making of girls/women (e.g., balancing vocational and family roles, issues related to training and employment of women in non-traditional occupations, family violence, sexual harassment and sexual assault), as well as acquiring knowledge which is relevant to counseling particular sub-groups, such as women with disabilities, women who are culturally different, long-term welfare recipients, and female offenders.

6. Counselors understand that the source of client difficulties often rests not only in the woman herself, but also in situational or cultural factors which limit her concept of self, and thwart her aspirations and the opportunities available to her. Counselors recognize, and are sensitive to, the impact of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination on the basis of gender—as well as race, age, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation and religion—and work to counteract the negative effects of such attitudes and actions.

7. Counselors are aware of, and continually review, their own values and biases and the effects of these on their female clients. Counselors assess and monitor their own activities to ensure gender-fair practices. They also participate in professional development programs, consultation and/or supervision, to assist in identifying and working through personal biases, and issues which have a limiting effect on their work with female clients.

8. Counselors support the elimination of sex bias within institutions and individuals by promoting fair and equal treatment of all individuals. They do this through services, programs, theories, practices and treatment of colleagues and clients which recognizes each person's full potential.

9. Knowing that there are circumstances where clients will have a preference for a same- or opposite-sex counselor, whenever possible, clients will be given the opportunity to choose their counselor.

The Working Group felt a need to go beyond suggestions for counselors to include guidelines for all jurisdictions employing counselors. Factors like access to training, supervision, and tools for delivering appropriate services for girls and women were seen as essential components in a strategy to promote labor market equality. The report includes the following specific measures to be taken by federal and provincial jurisdictions.

1. The jurisdiction is committed to providing or accessing the training and/or professional development that supervisors and counselors require to enable them to apply these principles effectively.

2. Each jurisdiction ensures that sex-fair language and balanced depictions of women appear in all publications and resource materials.

3. Counselors will be given an opportunity for supervision/ consultation to occur on a regular basis to assist them in working through conflicts and issues which arise in their work with clients.

4. A process will be put in place to monitor the implementation/ application of the guidelines.

The following recommendation was later endorsed by provincial Ministers:

It is recommended that each jurisdiction develop a policy and guidelines for the provision of career counseling to girls and women which reflect the principles and guidelines developed by the Collaborative Action Working Group on Counseling.

It was hoped that the guidelines would be reviewed by professional associations of counselors and adopted, or adapted to, their particular contexts. The Feminist Network of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association is intending to take leadership in this initiative.

Conclusion

The development of guidelines has been an excellent first step, but it is only a beginning. To translate the guidelines into practice, further work is needed to develop training for counselors and supervisors. The Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation, in partnership with other groups, is eager to pursue these next steps so that the guidelines and training can advance the practice of career counseling for girls and women.

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